

The Numbers of the Unmarried

SOME FACTS

AS IT IS well known that marriage rates have risen in England and Wales, and that earlier marriage has become more popular, it should come as no surprise that bachelors and spinsters have become scarcer. The proportions of the unmarried to all persons of the sex at ages 20–39 have changed as follows over the past thirty years:

	MEN	WOMEN
1936	0·44	0·40
1941	0·38	0·33
1946	0·38	0·31
1951	0·36	0·27
1956	0·34	0·23
1961	0·32	0·21
1966 (provisional)	0·32	0·20

Although widowed and divorced persons are included in these figures, their numbers are relatively insignificant and do not influence the result to any degree.

Having regard to the normal age at marriage, which is older for men than for women, the excess of the figures in the first column over those in the second is to be expected. It is interesting to note, however, that the reduction in time in the numbers of the young unmarried has been much greater for women than for men. This is because the relative numbers of the sexes have changed: in earlier days, the supply of men of marriageable age was depleted by emigration and by excess mortality, but these causes of depletion have largely been removed, with the result that there has been a relatively greater improvement in marriage prospects for women than for men. Consequently, fewer women than men remain unmarried—a reversal of an earlier pattern.

How far are these developments reflected in the data for other countries? Some information about proportions married at successive ages is available for a number of countries from the *Demographic Year Book* of the United Nations

Organization. It relates to the censuses taken in or around the years 1950 and 1960. Unfortunately, a number of areas of particular interest supplied information for one of these years and not the other, with the result that a comparison in time is not possible. A survey of ten countries for which adequate statistics are available shows the following features:

- i. the age of women at marriage is younger than that for men in all cases;
- ii. there has been a move towards earlier marriage throughout Europe, but an opposite tendency is observable in parts of Asia, e.g. Japan and Thailand.
- iii. a reduction in spinsterhood greater than that in bachelorhood is observable in a few countries, e.g. in Poland, but is not general; in the United States of America the tendency appears to be in the opposite direction.

The point to remember in connection with (iii) is that countries from which large scale emigration to the United States occurred would be expected to experience the same effects from the cessation of that migration as Britain has, while as the receiving country the USA would be expected to exhibit a contrary movement.

A topic of current importance in Britain is the effect on marriage rates of the exceptionally large numbers of births immediately after the Second World War. This now shows as an increase in the number of young men and women aged up to twenty. Because men marry later than women, the boys and girls in this group will not, in general, marry each other. Consequently some disturbances in marriage rates, and in the numbers of the unmarried, are to be expected owing to the inequality between the sexes in the numbers available for marriage.

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Some data on this subject are set out in the two tables which follow:

ENGLAND AND WALES

MARRIAGES OF GIRLS AGED 16 TO MEN AGED

	16	17	18	19	20 and over
1962	148	605	1127	1201	3087
1963	217	700	1393	1494	3588
1964	180	802	1306	1417	3203

The supply of girls and boys available for marriage at age sixteen increased from 1962 to 1963 by some 15 per cent and fell slightly from 1963 to 1964. As a result, marriages to men of all ages increased between 1962 and 1963 and fell again from 1963 to 1964. The single exception is that marriages to men aged seventeen rose again between 1963 and 1964; this is no doubt attributable to the fact that there were more

boys aged seventeen in 1964 than in 1963 because of the "bulge" in births in 1946-47.

MARRIAGES OF BOYS AGED 16 TO WOMEN AGED

	16	17	18	19	20 and over
1962	148	112	54	16	9
1963	217	129	61	31	18
1964	180	157	54	26	24

The corresponding data for boys marrying at age sixteen exhibit similar features, the only exception being an increase between 1963 and 1964 in the small number of marriages to women aged twenty or over.

Such fluctuations may well have a temporary rather than a lasting effect, although some American sociologists have suggested that the corresponding feature in the USA may give rise to a more permanent increase in the proportion of women unmarried.